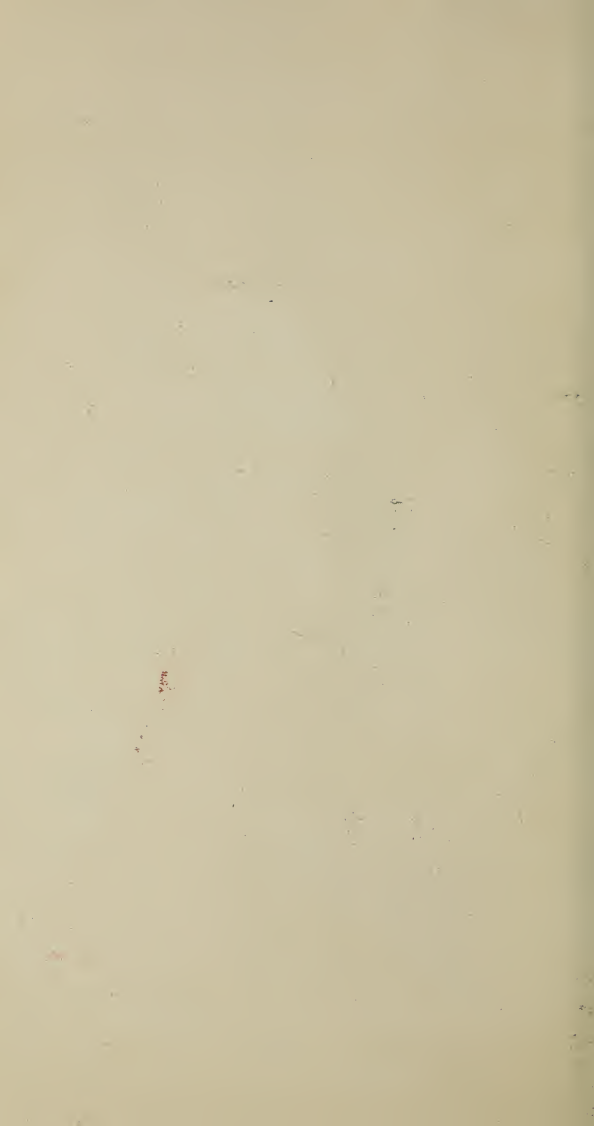


'Tis Christmas

In
Your Heart



BY DANIEL A. LORD S. J.



May
The Coming
Of The Christmas Child
Find
The Happiest Christmas
In Your Heart

Samuel Johnson

'Tis Christmas
in Your Heart

by
Daniel A. Lord, S. J.



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'Tis Christmas in Your Heart

'TIS a story that they love to tell in Ireland.

'Tis a story the whole world loves to hear.

For 'tis the story of how warm arms held the Infant King and Christ found His cradle on a human heart while Mary slept.

It seems that Brigid was still a young woman, the loveliest and the sweetest in all Ireland. The water of Patrick's baptism was still moist on her white, unstained forehead; the light of faith had wakened Bethlehem stars in her eyes—

When God gave her a vision and a dream.

She knelt, sweet maid, in her

father's castle, alone in the little room in which she prayed to God and loved God's mother. Christmas was in her heart as Christmas was in the crisp, crackling air about her. For 'twas the lovely eve of the lovely day when Heaven came to earth and the bosom of an immaculate maid became the first cradle of a God made man.

ALONE with her thoughts, Brigid dreamed of the Christmas soon to be sung in the chapel by the old priest who had once been a Druid, till he had bowed his venerable head, as did the Magi, before Incarnate Wisdom. The cold winds swept across her room, playing like mice among the rushes on the floor, or sighing about the corners like wishful souls of the weary Old Law, tired of their long delay.

But Brigid swept and garnished her soul for the coming dawn and the coming King.

SOON at the Christmas Mass the the Infant Savior was to come again. Soon she could hold Him within her breast. And for a moment even Mary she regarded without any envy. Christ would be hers too. He would be born in her virgin soul. What else could Christmas be except Christ coming to fill the soul with the glory of His Godhead hidden in swaddling clothes or in the disguise of a white host?

Yet the heart of Brigid was only for a moment content.

The white host would hide Him too completely. It held Him safe as never swaddling clothes had done, and it would bind Him away from her searching sight.

Ah, how she longed to see Him in all the pale sweetness of His infancy! How she ached to feel His tiny fingers fumbling at her throat, His helpless little head pillowed against her breast, His warm breath keeping rhythm with the sighs which were the beat of His soul, that could not sleep for love of heedless men.

TRULY the host was fair and hid Him in its whiteness. Yet even the Christmas Mass would not bring to her His mother. 'Twould be the priest that would bear Him to her, not Mary, who had placed Him trustfully in the arms of shepherds sweaty from running at an angel's command.

Brigid sighed for the whole of Christmas, for Christ and His mother, for the Child and the Madonna.

SHE sighed and she prayed.
She prayed and she sighed.
For her heart was heavy with the
joy of Christmas and heavy too
with an unsatisfied longing for
Bethlehem.

Then came the vision.

The sentry struck the midnight
hour heavily on her father's wall.
Brigid's eyes closed, then opened
again. And Christmas began.

The rough stone walls of her
room, damp with the winter's chill
and scarred with the never heal-
ing wounds of ancient masons, re-
ceded and grew dim. Gently the
walls sloped back until they were
the slanting of autumnal hills,
grey-brown against the heavy
folds of velvet sky. She lifted her
head to see, not the tapestried
ceiling of her cell, but the faint
flickers of watchful stars grown

pale before the resistless glory of one rival star that glowed over the hills.

And the little door that she had passed so often, as she walked from her room to the chapel, was the dark, forbidding entry of a cave.

SLOWLY Brigid rose, for the vision needed no angel to interpret it. Off in the pathways of the hills she heard voices that she knew were those of shepherds hurrying away to their heedless fellows with glad tidings of great joy. It was no longer the sighing of the wind she heard about her, but the last faint echoes of angelic song stirring the farthest corners of the earth.

And through the mouth of the cave trembled a failing light that touched the scarred entry with

fading warmth and beckoned her as it receded.

WITH quick steps she hurried forward and stood while the last rays of the light died against the warm wool of her white mantle, and the heavy red folds that were her sleeves, and the linen coif that bound her head and held captive her heavy braids.

Drawn forward by the dying light, she entered the cave—

And paused.

Surely, she should kneel and adore. Heaven was here, buried in the blue shadows of a cave. God was among His people, waiting for His worshipers.

But Brigid did not kneel. Her woman's heart was too full of pity for the scene.

FOR, struck down by the heavy hand of exhaustion, a stalwart man lay upon the rough earth of the cave, his traveler's cloak scarce wrapped around him, his traveler's stick dropped from his nerveless hand.

And against the wall, close to the manger, in which no mother long would leave her child, sat the weary Mary.

Her back curved as it sought rest against the cold surface of the cave's hewn rock. Her eyes were stroked with heavy lines of blue. Her shoulders sagged as if they bore the weight of the heavens. And her head bent forward in utter weariness.

Only her arms were alert. With the tireless skill of a mother, those arms made up for the frail strength of the girl. They curved

protectingly about her sleeping Son.

BRIGID looked and marveled.

Marveled that God could be so small and so sweet.

Marveled that God's mother could be so weary.

Marveled that she herself felt as much of pity as of love.

And out of a heart of mingled pity and love Brigid spoke.

"Mary," she said, and her voice was like the voice of a harp which is swept by a breeze, "Mary, you're tired indeed."

And the gentlest eyes in all the world looked up beneath lids laden with sleep, and the fair head that was Mary's bowed in assent.

Then whispered Brigid:

"AH, well you might be, ma-cushla. For 'tis I that know all you did and suffered ere you

bore your Joy. Long was the way from Nazareth and few the inns, and crowded. Sure, your strength was never great, and 'twas far miles you carried Him under your heart. You wandered long from house to house, weary and affrighted with the doors slamming in your face—and in His. Then up the long hillside to the cave and this cold comfort on a wintry night.

"Alone, macushla, well I know it was alone you bore your Child. For what use is even a good man when a woman's great hour has come? No woman took Him from your arms to bathe Him and wrap Him against the bitter wind. That too you did, alone.

"**N**OR could you sleep, mavourneen, till you had held Him up to adoring angels. And

were you wearied by the shepherds, who lingered long, held captive by their joy in Him and their unwillingness to leave the Lamb of God even for their own straying lambs along the hillside?

"Mary, beloved, you're weary. Good reason you're weary."

And Mary smiled, even though her lips were tremulous and her head was crushed with sleep.

"But you can sleep now, Mary machree." And Brigid slipped off her white wool mantle and laid it on the ground. "Of course you couldn't sleep; not till I came, beloved. What with the dangers of the night and the men that hate Him, you had to watch. But, Mary, if you'll let me . . . if, Mary, you'll trust me . . . if my arms can learn from yours the art of guarding Him . . . why, here's my cloak for

your cot and my bosom for His cradle."

AND bold in her desire, yet abashed at her temerity, Brigid dropped her eyes—blue, starred with the stars of hope; then slowly lifted them, hoping, praying, holding out her arms.

Then Mary smiled again, and Brigid knew her prayer was answered.

Brigid was on her knees that second, close to Mary's side. Gently the mother passed her Babe from the hollow of her arms to the cradling arms of Brigid. Gently she relaxed her weary body upon the soft wool of Brigid's mantle. Her eyes fluttered and closed. She was asleep.

Within the arms of Brigid the Infant King stirred as if accustoming Himself to His new cradle.

Then a deep sigh was born of trust and contentment. His tiny body snuggled against her bosom. Small fingers, warm and helpless yet resistlessly powerful, touched her throat. And Brigid sank back against the wall of the cave, her voice, the sheerest breath of melody, singing to Jesus of Bethlehem an Irish lullaby.

AND so it happened that while Joseph slept the sleep of shame and exhaustion (shame for the cave he had offered his bride; exhaustion from his efforts to avoid that shame), and Mary rested trustfully upon the mantle of Brigid, Brigid played nurse and foster mother to the Son of God.

And the Son of God accepted her bosom, pure as the snows never were upon the roofs of her convents, comforting as the fire of

a love that was strong enough to warm her God.

The Infant of Bethlehem had made of Brigid's heart the second cradle of His Christmastide.

THE vision faded, say the Irish bards who tell the story, as all visions must fade until the unfading vision of the eternal Christmas. The slanting hillside stood straight again and became the cold gray stone of her familiar wall. The tapestry-hung ceiling shut out the sight of stars. The weary Joseph and the sleeping Mary were gone, and Brigid looked down into the empty hollow of her arms that had recently cradled the King of Christmas.

Empty, but not for long.

For Brigid rose, and through the door that had been the mouth of Bethlehem's cave she walked

from her room into the chapel for the Mass of Christmas.

Do you see now why the Irish call their Brigid the foster mother of the Savior?

And shall we follow her through that little door which leads to the Bethlehem that is our Christmas Mass? And shall we too take into our cradling hearts the Christ of the Christmastide?

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